

## Jason Isbell & the 400 Unit

*Here We Rest* (Lightning Rod Records) Release date: April 12<sup>th</sup>

*Here We Rest*: The first motto of Jason Isbell's home state got changed in the early part of last century to a Latin phrase that translates to "we dare defend our rights". What starts out as peaceful idyll descends into a defensive posture with the threat of bellicosity just beneath the surface. That's what tough times will do to a people.

Jason Isbell's home is northern Alabama, a region that has been hit especially hard in the recent economic downturn. "The mood here has darkened considerably," says Jason. "There is a real culture around Muscle Shoals, Florence and Sheffield of family, of people taking care of their own. When people lose their ability to do that, their sense of self dissolves. It has a devastating effect on personal relationships, and mine were not immune."

The characters that populate *Here We Rest* are wrung out. In "Alabama Pines", the protagonist has found himself on the outside of the life he once knew. He is living in a small room and in a state of emotional disrepair - estranged from the woman that he loved, as well as friends ("I don't even need a name anymore/When no one calls it out, it kinda vanishes away"). He is beginning to recognize that his own remoteness and obstinacy has played a large part in his current state of affairs, and longs for "someone to take him home through those Alabama pines." He's not quite clear how to get back there himself.

Place plays a prominent role in the songs on *Here We Rest*. Jason was home considerably more this year, having toured less in 2010. After being on the road for 200 or more days for more years than he cares to count, he stayed home mostly to write and record this album. "I could probably live anywhere, but I love it here," says Jason. "Being home is very different than being on the road. You learn a certain discipline that has its entire context within the touring lifestyle. This was the first time that I've been an adult in my own house, in my own community. Plus on the road, you have your whiskey waiting for you when you get to the gig. Here you have to go get it."

Spending all that time around his hometown, he could reacquaint himself with the locale and immerse himself with the rhythms of life in northern Alabama. "Being able to sit on my stool at D.P.'s, a bar in the building I live in, talk to my friends, and hear the problems that they have helped inform some of these songs." Sometimes, people in that bar grow tired of hearing others bitch when they themselves were on the edge, and it would sometimes lead to fights. "Save It For Sunday" grew out of one of those experiences. A bar patron, unsure of the solidity of his relationship, tells his fellow bar patron that "we got cares of our own," and suggesting that he save his sorrows for his "choir and everyone" at his church.

Our military draws disproportionately from areas that are economically depressed, and northern Alabama has more than its share of those that have served, not only out of a deep sense of patriotism, but also because of shrinking employment options. In "Tour Of Duty," Jason writes of a soldier that is coming home from war for the last time, and will try, more than likely in vain, to assimilate back into civilian life. His soldier is voracious for normalcy. He admits to not knowing or caring how his loved one has changed and dreams of eating chicken wings and starting a family. But there's a subtle sense that this craving for normalcy will cause him to suppress the damage done to him during wartime: "I promise not to bore you with my stories/I promise not to scare you with my tears/I never would exaggerate the glory/I'll seem so satisfied here." Seeming satisfied is not being satisfied, but it's the best he can imagine.

The time off from the road also had an effect on the musical sensibilities that shaped this album. Jason was able to collaborate with more artists (he played on the latest albums by Justin Townes Earle, Middle Brother, Abby Owens and Coy Bowles), which broadened his ideas about how he could present his own music. "I always felt like certain things, like my guitar playing, had to be perfect, and when I was in the studio environment, I could

make sure that it was. But looking back, it might have robbed the music of a certain amount of spontaneity. There's more out and out rock and roll guitar on this album." In addition, Jason embraces a more acoustic, more traditional country music sound to a degree that he had been reluctant to in the past. "When you come from Alabama, that country soul music is in the water. I've always loved it and been proud of it, but there's always been this sense of proving that you were capable of more than *just* that. If I was going to create an album that gave listeners a sense of the place, I felt it was important to let the songs go there if they wanted to."

The time at home has also had an effect on the lyrical point of view of the album. Because of the subject material of the album, Jason wrote from a more empathetic point of view than ever before. "I tried more than ever to get out from behind my own eyes and see things through others' eyes," he says. In "We've Met," Jason puts himself in the place of a person that was left behind in their hometown and, with a tinge of bitterness, remembers the one who went away better than they are remembered (Jason says, "I'm quite sure that I've been the person that didn't remember before, and I hate it").

As with the last album, the 400 Unit shines. Keyboard player Derry deBorja, guitarist Browan Lollar, bassist Jimbo Hart and drummer Chad Gamble play with either the ferocity or subtlety that the songs call for. Having played over four hundred shows together as a band have given Jason and the guys an innate sense of one another; they are gelling into a truly great band.

The original state motto was written by Alexander Beaufort Meek, a former Alabama attorney general, in his 1842 essay outlining the history of the state. The last lines of that history say: "We have shown the condition and character of our population; the Red Sea of trials and suffering through which they had to pass; the fragile bark that floated in triumph through the perils of the tide....From such rude and troublous beginnings, the present population of Alabama, acquired the right to say, 'Here we rest!'" The times are indeed rude and troublous again in Alabama, and Jason Isbell's inspired album offers both documentation and the same fervent hope that his people will find their rest.

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